



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1 Corinthians 11, 12, 14

“The Local Church: Its Ministry and Meetings”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Again, Lord, we turn to Thee through the Lord Jesus Christ, our great high priest. And we pray that Thou wilt illumine us as we study again the doctrine of the local church. Help us, Lord, to understand and enable us to put into practice the things that we see in the Scriptures. Guide and direct us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] The subject tonight as I've just said is the ministry and meetings of the local church. The subject tonight raises the question of the kind of church with which we should be affiliated. Believers Chapel has from its beginning been committed to the principle that the choice of one's church is a very important matter and is to be decided ultimately by the word of God. I think that there are other questions or there're other things that frequently are determinative in the choice of churches by evangelical Christians. Some of them choose a church because it has been their family's church. It may well have been an evangelical church. But they have not really made a decision with regard to the church other than to simply be a part of the church that has been the church of their family for a generation or two or more. Others choose churches on the basis of the size of the church because they think that the size of the church means that there will be better facilities and thus they're better able to meet their needs. Some

choose churches because of the influence of the church. Occasionally, even you will meet people who like to say, “I’m a member of the first church.” And sometimes that’s what they really say. I did not say First Baptist or First Presbyterian or First Christian because I didn’t want it to be a particularly denominational thing. But have you not noticed people who, when you ask them what their church is they will say, “I’m a member of the first church.” And they expect you to know that it’s the Baptist church or the Presbyterian church or the Christian church or whatever it may be. They take a little bit of pride in the fact that they are a member of the first church.

Now, I know that’s true because I used to take a great deal of pride in the fact that I was a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Charleston, South Carolina and the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Alabama. I considered it coming down a little bit when I joined by wife’s church, which was the South Highland Presbyterian Church in Birmingham.

There are others who choose their churches on the basis of opportunities for ministry. That would seem to be a wiser standard by which to choose a church, but it really is not. There are some who will say, “I will be a member of this church because they will let me teach a Sunday school class,” not realizing that in their decision they may be violating some principle that they themselves see in the Bible. And when we violate a principle that we see in the Bible, we are guilty of a form of expediency. It may be very small. But a person who will be guilty of one expedient act will find it much easier to be guilty of another more serious one. Because when we do engage in expediency, in a moral sense we weaken our own character. And thus, the pattern ultimately might lead, it may not, but it might lead to something far more serious than that.

Still, others choose churches on the basis of friendliness. That church is a friendly church. The other church is a very cold church. I attended for six months and no one spoke to me. Of course, I didn’t speak to anyone else either, but they did not speak to me. All of these, of course, are human standards. And the question of the choice of a

church should not be ultimately based upon human standards. It really should be, “What does the Bible teach concerning the local church?” And all things being equal, I think we should be associated with a church that is most in conformity with the teaching of the word of God on the practices and the position of the local church.

Now, we’ve been trying to set forth a number of principles of church order. And we have said in the beginning that the New Testament church order is just as plain as the plan of salvation. I still affirm that. I think it is true. Church order is just as plain as the plan of salvation. And if you have any question about that, I ask you to consider the relationship of baptism to salvation for you to realize that the question of the plan of salvation does have its own peculiar forms of difficulties. Then we have said that the supreme principles of the local church are these. Government should be by a plurality of elders. In this sense, a church would be Presbyterian. Government by a session in the Presbyterian church or by a consistory in the Christian reform church or by a body of elders. We have said that ministry of the word should be by gifted men.

Now, that means that if there is one gifted man in the local church, ministry should be in the hands of the one man. If there are two, there should be opportunity for ministry by the two men. If there are a number of gifted men, there should be opportunity for the exercise of the many gifted men of their gifts. We have said that priesthood should be exercised by every believer, but in the meetings of the church only by the men. For Paul does lay a stricture upon the audible exercise of priestly gifts in the local church by the women except in so far as they do participate in the singing of a hymn of praise or ideally they should participate in the prayers. We do, all of us when one brother leads us in prayer or in giving. There’re other ways for the woman to exercise her priestly ministry in the meeting of the local church than by some audible singular participation. We have also implied, if we have not said it directly, that it is necessary for the effective practicing of the principles of the local church for the local church to have one meeting at least a week in which there is opportunity for spirit-led

worship and ministry. In other words, there should be one meeting of the week in which it is a free meeting and the gifted men may participate as the Holy Spirit leads them.

Now, in Believers Chapel we do not have a perfect representation of this, of course. And I don't want you to think that we are attempting to say that Believers Chapel is the ideal church. No doubt, it's not the ideal church. But at least there is a meeting in which this is possible on Sunday night. When we meet it is possible for men who have spiritual gifts to exercise their gifts. It is possible for the priests to exercise their priesthood. And so in this meeting we have the possibilities of a full fledged New Testament practice of a local church meeting.

Now, I think that we also can say that any church violating these principles is ultimately unacceptable.

Now, let me make plain a very important point here. I know that the impression that you get when someone speaks this way is that “he certainly is proud. He certainly is arrogant. I know things about Believers Chapel that are not good.” And of course we all no doubt if we knew the church well would know things that were not ideal. I hope that the elders when they find out things that are not ideal do something about it. But let me make one thing very plain. We do not mean that God blesses only the church that is organized according to the principles of the word of God. It is obvious that there are many churches that are blessed by God that are not organized in this way. It is because there are certain things that are very good about these churches. The ministry may be very good. The attitude of the people may be very spiritual in the sphere in which they are in harmony with the word of God.

And furthermore, it is possible for a church beautifully organized and perfectly organized that you cannot find anything wrong with its organization to be dead and unblessed by God. Read only the letters of our Lord to the churches in the Book of Revelation. And if you as a member of Believers Chapel – and some of you are – if you as a member of Believers Chapel ever get to the place where you think that God blesses

us because we're organized correctly and for that reason only then of course we can expect the blessing of God to diminish in the meetings of this local church. So we should be very careful to admit that it is possible for others to be blessed more than we are by God because in other aspects they are more in harmony with the word of God even though we may think that we are organized as God sets forth in his word. The ideal is to be organized properly and then to have a vital spiritual relationship, each of us, to the Lord. That's the ideal. And we have not arrived at the ideal yet.

One other thing, in matters that are not specifically commanded, the principle, apostolic practice is apostolic precept is a generally valid and workable principle.

Now, you notice I've hedged a little bit here because I don't know really the perfect application of this principle. I do think that it is fair to say that when the apostles do not say anything about a specific proposition or a specific question if we know that they have acted in their lives and in their ministry in a certain way then it's fair for us to say they would have taught that that was the proper way to do it. In other words, what they did is a reflection of what they believed.

Now, that I think is a generally valid principle. Now, I admit I have a little bit of a problem. It's a kind of a technical problem. But I know that the apostle said that we should greet one another with a holy kiss. And I don't know whether we should in our society greet one another with a holy kiss or whether we should be satisfied with a firm handshake. So, I say generally. But the apostle appealed to the things that he did as in harmony with his teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 4. So that principle, I think, is a biblical principle. And it is generally valid and workable. If we can show the apostles did a certain thing in a certain way even though they didn't say, "This is the way you ought to do it," we should follow their practices as far as we can.

Now, having said all of that we come tonight to the church meeting. And first of all we want to say a few words about the origin of the New Testament church meeting.

Now, I am assuming that we have read enough of the New Testament to know that when the early church met together they met together in a meeting in which there was freedom of utterance.

Now, that is evident from 1 Corinthians chapter 14, verse 26. And if you have never read this verse or have not pondered it in this connection, let me read it again. 1 Corinthians chapter 14, verse 26, “What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”

Now, notice, he says, “What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble.” Now, he is talking about the church meeting “when you assemble.” And he says that when they assembled, “Each of them has either a psalm, a teaching, a revelation (which is the gift of prophecy) or a tongue and its interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.” It is evident for this to transpire in the local church meeting that there must be freedom of utterance in that meeting. So, we assume then that there is that.

Where did this come from? That is, this practice of gathering together and having freedom of utterance. By the way, this is not a unique interpretation that I’m offering incidentally. There are Presbyterians who have affirmed that this is the way the early church met, the outstanding Presbyterian teachers of today, men like William Barclay, he admits this. And on the other hand, men like Leon Morris and others of the Anglican church have also admitted this is the way the early church met. There doesn’t seem to be any possible way of denying this. They did have this kind of meeting. Where did they get it? Well, they probably got it from the synagogue service because in the synagogue there was a comparable meeting of the synagogue. Its meeting was of this character.

In the synagogue they had some rather interesting things. They had a place where which they call Moses’ seat. I don’t know whether that corresponds to the place over here or not where the preacher sits on Sunday morning before he gets up and speaks. I speak not of myself, but of others who are also here. You might want to call that Moses’

seat if you like, but we don't have any such practice. But they did have a place called Moses' seat where the most prominent rabbi sat, but there were others.

The supervision of the synagogue rested in the hands of a group of men who were called elders. And that too would be in harmony with the local church practice of having elders. Incidentally, we have said, remember, that the elders probably came from the Old Testament and the synagogue because they were introduced in the New Testament without any explanation.

Now, there was no resident priest and there was no rabbi who conducted the services of the synagogue. In other words, there was nothing that would correspond to the modern day pastor recognized as the conductor of the services. That did not exist in the synagogue; it did not exist in Israel. What about the ruler of the synagogue. Don't we read about the ruler of the synagogue in the New Testament? Yes, we do. We read of the conversion of one of them, Christmas. But what about the ruler of the synagogue, what kind of man was he and what was his duty? Well, in the first place he was a layman. He was not a priest, he was a layman. And he had the care of the building and he was responsible for order in the services. The ruler of the synagogue was not a man who determined to do the preaching or did the preaching. He was a man who carried on the functions of a deacon and also of a kind of elder in the sense that he was responsible for order in the services. He selected the individuals who read the Scripture in the Scripture reading time. There was also an individual who was known as the hazzan.

Now, you spell that h-a-z-z-a-n. The hazzan was an attendant. We have that in the New Testament remember when the Lord Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth an attendant brought the Scripture to him and he opened it to the Book of Isaiah and read from it. So they were there and the attendants did just that. They had charge of the Scripture and so they brought the Scripture to the individuals who were to do the reading for that particular morning. The service itself went like this. There was a call to prayer and at the call to prayer there was the recitation of the Shema Yisrael and my

recollection is there may have been the recitation of a little bit more of certain passages of the Old Testament. Then there was what was called the lifting up of the hands, a time of prayer and the time of recitation of prayers. And you'll remember that in the New Testament there is a reference to the lifting up of hands. So carried over into the New Testament times is this. This may be the only thing that the charismatic movement is biblical about, when they raise their hands. (Now, I'm just kidding when I say that, you understand. There's another thing that their scriptural in. Don't take me too seriously in case you're from the charismatic movement). After this there was a reading of a passage from Moses. And so the Bible was brought to someone who was to do the reading for that day and a passage from Moses was read. And then a passage from the prophets was read. So there were readings from Moses and then readings from the prophets.

Now, in the time of our Lord the reading would be from the Hebrew text. And there may well have been an Aramaic paraphrase of that particular passage. But there were readings then from Moses and from the prophets. And then if there was a qualified man present, then that man would give an exposition of the word of God and specifically of the passage that had been read. So the exposition was turned over to anyone who happened to be present who was a qualified man to do that. That is a rabbi.

Now, do you remember the apostle's experience when he came to Antioch? We read in Acts chapter 13 and verse 13,

“Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. (Now notice), And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, and said to them, ‘Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.’”



So, they recognize the Apostle Paul and the others as perhaps men of scriptural knowledge and they invited them to participate at that time.

Now, that was in accordance with the custom of the synagogue. The gifted men had freedom to exercise their gifts even in the synagogue.

Now, this was carried over into the New Testament and this is why in the local church ministry is by gifted men.

Now, in Believers Chapel, if there is a gifted man who comes in he should have freedom to exercise his gift.

Now, we are so accustomed now to having only one man minister the word of God that it's difficult for us to put ourselves in the other position and get used to it. But this is what the New Testament teaches. Ministry is by gifted men. It was not unique to them; they knew it from the synagogue. And the Apostle Paul knew it. Incidentally, after the exposition of the word of God by the gifted men, then there would be the pronouncement of the Aaronic Benediction and the service would be over.

You know the Lord Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth; he had the Scriptures brought to him. He stood up to read and then he sat down to teach and he expounded Isaiah chapter 61 which had been read and pointed out how those things had been fulfilled in him. And he got the response of some preachers. He was immediately the object of a great deal of persecution.

So, the church meeting then is a meeting that has its major outlines from the synagogue service. It was not something unique. It was not something different. It was something that arose out of the situation in which they found themselves.

Let's turn now to the organization of the church meeting. And I want to say just a few things here. I suggest that you read those Scriptures that I have put beside the headings, the organization of the church meeting. The principal passages are 1 Corinthians chapter 11, verse 17 through verse 20 and then verse 33, chapter 14 verse 23 and verse 26. And you will notice the occurrence of this expression “come together” or

“assemble.” That term *sunerchomai* is a term that means to come together and represents the gathering of the believers for the church meeting, the time of the early church meeting.

Now, from 1 Corinthians chapter 16:2 and Acts chapter 20 and verse 7 it appears that the early church met each Lord’s Day. Incidentally, they had not learned that Easter was to be practiced or to be observed on only one Sunday. They had not yet learned that.

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, in one of his books, says, “Is it any wonder that the living Christian celebrates Easter Sunday every day in the year? Do not try to limit me to one Sunday fixed by the moon in relation to the vernal equinox. Ecclesiastics have devised a calendar which allows Easter to dance along the calendar from March to April. But the child of God knows resurrection in the dead of winter or the heat of summer.” They met on the first day of the week because every Sunday for them was the celebration of a festival of the resurrection. They hadn’t yet been told, “Now, wait. You observe the resurrection in the spring.”

So, characteristic of their meetings was the thought of the resurrection and they thought of those meetings as a time when in the light of the experience of the Lord with the apostles after his resurrection that he was truly meeting with them. Remember, in John chapter 20. On the first day of the week Jesus came, the doors being shut, and ministered to them fellowship with them. So that every church meeting is a meeting of the saints in which the risen Lord is present in the midst. “He walks in the midst of the candlesticks,” the Book of Revelation says in chapter 2. And in that we have a picture of our Lord walking in the midst of the local church in its meeting. Ideally, he is present with us in all of our meetings.

Now, wouldn’t that make a tremendous difference if we really grasped that in our meeting? Second, the place. Looking at the things that the New Testament says and putting these passages of Scripture together, I think you get the impression that they

entered into the temple and they often met there for testimony, but primarily they met in the homes for worship. There was not necessarily just one meeting of the local church, although the stress rests upon that. There were meetings which were meetings of the church in which testimony took place.

Now, it is my own personal opinion – I do not speak for the elders on this – it is my own personal feeling that if you study through the New Testament and ask the question, “What is the meeting of the church,” that you can say that the evening meeting in which you observe the Lord’s Supper is preeminently the meeting of the church. But I don’t think that that is exclusively the meeting of the church. I think any meeting that the elders call as a meeting of the church will be a meeting of the church. And for me, the ministry of the word meeting, just to use an illustration in Believers Chapel is also a meeting of the church. So, I would not say that our meeting on Sunday night is the only meeting of the church. Some, on the other hand, do. And I don’t feel that I feel so strong that I cannot work within that kind of relationship. But my own personal feeling is that the elders have authority to call a meeting of the local church. And it will be a meeting of the church. And if they have a meeting for ministry of the word, it is a meeting of the church. But ideally the meeting of the church is the meeting in which we have opportunity for exercise of gifts freely and ultimately observe the Lord’s Supper.

Third, the people. From what we read in the New Testament we would also gather that when the local church met, the whole community of believers met in one place. So far as I can tell, separate meetings of one church are frowned on in the New Testament. That is, they are not recognized in the New Testament. And Ignatius has a statement to the effect that such separate meetings of the one church are frowned upon by the church of the Apostolic Fathers. So, I would gather then that the whole church meets together in one place. And that that is the ideal. That we should not have little meetings of the church in seven or eight different places and speak of them as the church meeting.

Supervision. Ultimately, the supervision in the local church meeting rests with God. He is the one in charge of the meeting. In fact, our Lord Jesus is called the head of the church. And I think that is designed to let us know that the person who is in charge of the local church meeting is ultimately our Lord Jesus Christ. He's the head of the church. The elders are under shepherds of him, the Great Shepherd. And they exercise supervision only under him.

Now, if the elders are out of harmony with the word of God and you can show that, you should follow of course what our Lord says. But the Lord is the head of the church. And the elders are under shepherds. He ministers his headship through men. But they must be in accordance with the teaching of his word. Otherwise, he will speak more directly. And I think that that is what has happened in many churches.

Mr. Barkley says that one of the reasons – in fact James Denney also, who was one of the most respected of the Scottish Presbyterian theologians – Mr. Denney said that because the church has had a tendency to squelch the ministry of the word by different men, God has had to speak more directly and he has not hesitated to do it. And then he named a number of different movements, which have been protests against the idea that church ministry is limited to one man. And God is powerful enough to accomplish his purpose. And if we try to prevent his will from happening, it will happen in his own way. And he'll have to raise up others. And he does raise up others to practice his principles. The primary purpose of the meeting.

Now, good men differ over the primary purpose of the meeting. C.F.D. Moule, an outstanding Anglican theologian, has taken issue with some of the others insisting that the goal of the meeting of the church is not necessarily the observance of the Lord's Supper. On the other hand, another very, very prominent modern day theologian, Oscar Cullmann, professor in Switzerland and also a minister of the reformed church, professor Cullmann has insisted with a great deal of documentation that the aim and goal of the early church meeting – and incidently he didn't practice this in his own church – but the

goal and aim of the church meeting was the observance of the Lord's Supper. And that at every meeting of the local church the Lord's Supper was observed.

Well, it's not necessary for us to make a decision about something like that because I think we – I've already said it's possible for us to have a church meeting in which we do not observe the Lord's Supper. But so far as the New Testament is concerned, it seems plain that the early church did observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday. And the implication you'll get is that it was a preeminent feature in the local church service.

For example, when the apostle came to Troas and he was there preaching he began by preaching the word. He actually preached until after midnight. He preached Eutychus to sleep. And incidently I read the other day, “What should you do in case some people in the congregation fall asleep?” And some fellow replied, “You should go up in the pulpit and wake up the preacher.” [Laughter]

Now, that's an unbiblical reply because the apostle preached and people fell asleep. Incidently, I think that's about the only objection I could give to that advice. That may be very good advice. Get up in the pulpit and wake up the preacher. But the apostle preached Eutychus to sleep. And you'll notice that after he fell and was evidently raised to life, they sat down and observed the Lord's Supper. I think that is what is meant when they said they sat down and ate. So, it would seem that even when he preached for a lengthy period of time they still concluded the meeting with the observance of the Lord's Supper.

I have already said that there is wide agreement that the Lord's Supper should be observed in the local church meeting. John Calvin, in the *Institutes*, says that the supper should be observed very frequently and at least once in every week, *Institutes* book four, chapter seventeen. That covers all the Presbyterian and reformed men. John Wesley led the early societies in the observance of the Lord's Supper every Sunday. That covers the Methodists and Wesleyans. Charles Hadden Spurgeon, the famous Baptist preacher,

wrote “Shame on the Christian church that she should put it off to once a month. They who once know the sweetness of each Lord’s Day celebrating his supper will not be content I’m sure to put it off to less frequent seasons.” That takes care of the Baptists.

So, you can see that there is wide agreement that the observance of the Lord’s Supper should form a prominent part of the ministry of the local church. I think it’s fair to say that the primary purpose of our meeting together is to remember our Lord in the breaking of the bread and in the taking of the cup. Along with that, and very prominent and very important, is the ministry of the word and then the exercise of our priestly office in praise and thanksgiving and in giving. In other words, all of these functions belong in the local church meeting. The ultimate aim as expressed in that text I read from 1 Corinthians chapter 14 and verse 26 “Let all things be done unto edification.”

Now, that I think is important. That’s the general principle. “Let all things be done for edification.”

Now, you notice that through that 14th chapter that idea is expressed more than once. I do think that is a legitimate guide for the elders in our meeting. Is the utterance edifying? In other words, when a person exercises his gift is it edifying? If it’s not, we have the responsibility, the elders have the responsibility, of saying to the brother, “I don’t really think that that was edifying.”

Now, that should not disturb you. And that shouldn’t disturb the person who hears from the elders that way. It should improve him. It should help him. I assume that they do this accurately and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Most of us who are preachers have appreciated very much the criticism that we have gotten. And we may not have appreciated all that we got, particularly from our wives, but it has probably been good for us. I have a good friend who is a preacher who says that “The moment that your wife becomes satisfied with your preaching you will never improve from that point on.” And I want you to know that I should be improving every Sunday [Laughter] because I usually get some word of salt every Sunday. Some of

it's not very pleasant. [Laughter] That is, for me. But I am grateful for those words of criticism. The atmosphere – took little grace for me to say that, but a whole lot appreciate it really. [Laughter]

Finally, just a word about the atmosphere. The whole atmosphere of the church meeting is to be an atmosphere of the presence of our Lord through the Holy Spirit. You know in chapter 12, verse 3 and 4 we read some words that evidently were statements that were spoken in the church meeting. “Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus is accursed’; and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” I think in the context of that statement, it's evident that in the church meeting there occasionally would be someone who would just, as a form of ejaculation, say, “Jesus is Lord,” just guided by the Holy Spirit.

Now, Paul said he'd rather speak five words that could be understood than ten thousand that couldn't. And I would think that “Jesus is Lord” is far more edifying than all of the words that you could possibly speak in ecstatic speech. So, it does appear that in the local church there was this freedom and the sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit. I think it must have been something like – and I'm saying this in a solemn way – those meetings must have been truly like electricity. There was a spark to them. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that in the right sense.

Now, I'm not taking about the Whirling Dervishes or the Howling Dervishes of the East in which those who are spiritual men whirl and howl and scream as if to show that they are led by the Holy Spirit. We have our own form of that in the United States in the Holy Rollers around whose meetings some of us used to gather when we were young in order to get a laugh when there was nothing to do on Saturday night. [Laughter]

Now, let me say a few words about the characteristics of the church meeting. We've said some of this, but let me repeat. There was first of all freedom for the exercise of spiritual gifts.

Now, if you will look at a passage such as Acts chapter 13, verse 2, you could see how this worked out in practice. You might turn there for a moment. We can look at that. In Acts chapter 13 and verse 2 we have the account of the separation of Paul and Barnabas for the ministry of the first missionary journey. In verse 1 we read,

“Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, (Notice plural, prophets. Not just one, prophets and teachers. Not just one, teachers. Do you know that there is no church in the New Testament which is addressed by or to its so called pastor? There is no such in the New Testament. Here, in the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, plurality of elders, plurality in ministry. Now, they're named): Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting (In other words, they were having a meeting), suddenly the Holy Spirit said (I presume through one of these prophets because that's the way they spoke. “Agabus rose up and prophesied in the spirit,” we read elsewhere. One of the prophets stood up and said), ‘Set the Holy Spirit has spoken to me and he has given me the message that (and this is the message of the spirit) separate for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”

In other words, right here in the midst of the meeting the Holy Spirit spoke to the congregation through one of those prophets. There was freedom for the exercise of the gifts. I know occasionally people will say, “In your meeting anybody can speak.” Well, yes, anybody can speak. It's true. But we really should not say “anyone may speak,” because strictly speaking only those who have spiritual gifts should get up in a meeting and seek to teach. In other words, when you stand on your feet and seek to teach the word of God you are claiming that you do have a spiritual gift of teaching. It's a serious thing to get on your feet and make a claim which is not justified.



Now, in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verse 19 and 20. Would you turn over there for a moment? In 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verse 19 we read, “Do not quench the Spirit.”

Now, most of you know that I was taught in theology by, among others, Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer of Dallas Theological Seminary. Dr. Chafer says in his systemic theology, the thing that he used to say to us in class, “The spirit is grieved when sin occurs and remains unconfessed. The spirit is quenched when a Christian resists or rejects the will of God for him.” Dr. Chafer used to take this text and take it out of its context and put in the life of a Christian in his daily life and use it only in that sense.

Now, that is an extraction of this text from its context. Notice its context. The apostle says, “Pray without ceasing in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you. Do not quench the Spirit; (verse 20) do not despise prophetic utterances. (They are things by the spirit). But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good.”

You see this expression “quench not the spirit” is given in the context of the meeting of the local church and in the specific context of “not despising prophetic utterances.” It's evident in the church at Thessalonica there were men standing up and saying things as prophets that some of the elders didn't like. They may have stood up and said, “There are things wrong in this church.” And the elders didn't like to hear that. And so they told these men they couldn't speak. To quench is to throw cold water on something from the outside. And even the figure that you know, it's not the quenching within that's referred to, but the quenching within a meeting in which others prevent the prophets from speaking. Paul says, “Quench not the Holy Spirit.” Fausset says, “Do not throw cold water on those who under the spirit's extraordinary inspiration speak with tongues, reveal mysteries or pray in the congregation.” James Denney goes on to say that he agrees with that interpretation. Frame and his commentary and the International Critical Commentary agree with it. It's generally agreed upon that the meaning has

reference to the meetings of the local church in which there was freedom of utterance. It was a word from God “Do not prevent the gifted men from speaking in the local church.”

Now, unwittingly many of our churches are violating that command of the Apostle Paul, “Quench not the spirit,” by having no meeting in which the gifted men are free to exercise their spiritual gifts to the whole body. They are quenching the spirit.

Unwittingly, granted. But remember, we are anxious to follow, if we can, the whole of the word of God.

There should be freedom for the exercise of priesthood. We’ve talked about that. The necessity of edification. This is an important control on all of the utterances. We can go to the extreme. We can go to the extreme of letting everyone speak in the meeting and do not have any elderly control of their utterances. And so people get up and give a little testimony about what happened to them when they bought five gallons of gas on Tuesday. And that’s not really edifying, particularly when it’s the same person who gets up every time and tells about some little experience the he has.

Now, of course, there may be times when someone stands up in the meeting and expresses a word of praise to God which is very edifying. But this is not an apostolic prescription for anyone getting up in the meeting and saying anything. We have noticed in our meetings frequently as we are progressing and we’re thinking about the things of the Lord and centering our attention more definitely on what Christ has done for us, when someone stands up and for five minutes speaks about something that’s utterly extraneous to what we’ve been thinking about. It seems to me, that is poor subjection to the Holy Spirit as he is moving the meeting along. We should be careful of the things that we say in the meeting. And be sure that the Holy Spirit is really leading us because the test of all of the utterances edification is the body of Christ built up by what we say in the meeting. There is a necessity for tranquility.

Now, the apostle talks about things should be done decently and in order. There should be no tumult in the assemblies. That’s one of the reasons we do not feel that –

well I should not say that. That really does not have any application except insofar as we talk about ecstatic speech. Ecstatic speech is when a person loses control of himself.

The Holy Spirit, we read in chapter 5 of Galatians, says through the Apostle Paul that one of the evidences of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life is self control. One of the virtues of the fruit of the spirit is self control. So, in the meeting when a person gets up and is carried away by emotion and speaks in ecstatic speech, he is not in control. And that in itself should let us know that ecstatic speech is not a part of the utterances of the local church.

I remember years ago being out in Eagle Ford. And one Sunday afternoon I was speaking with a young man about twenty-five years of age about spiritual things and he told me he was a member of a Pentecostal church. And he asked me if I had ever had the baptism. I said, “I certainly did when I believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.” And then I went on to explain to him that everybody who had believed in Christ was baptized. And he, of course, then went on to say, “That wasn’t what I was talking about.” He was talking about speaking in tongues. I said, “Well, tell me your experience.” And he said, “Well, for a longtime I attended the meetings of the church, particularly the prayer meetings and sought to speak in tongues. Every Wednesday night I would get down on my knees with some of the men and I would seek to speak in tongues.” He described it as if it were really a very trying thing. “Until one night,” he said, “As I was in prayer I suddenly began to speak in tongues. And I began to speak in tongues.” And he said, “Right in the middle of it I said to myself ‘I’ll try to say the name of Jesus.’” And he said, “You know Lewis, I couldn’t say the name Jesus I was so carried away.” Well, I couldn’t help but think if he was so carried away he couldn’t say the name of Jesus he had lost control of himself. And furthermore, any kind of utterance in which you couldn’t utter the name of the Lord is probably not of God. So, when we read that the meetings are to be meetings in which tranquility and peace are present, I think that that in itself rules out ecstatic speech.

There is the necessity for decorum and system. Things should be done decently. Incidentally, that's the word used to describe one of the men who buried the Lord Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea. He was an honorable counselor. Things should be done decently and in order. No sanctified disorder, but beauty and harmony. I think that the meeting of the local church should be when we get up out of the meeting we are guided by the Holy Spirit in it, there is freedom in it, but there should be the sense of decency and order in the meeting of the saints. And when the Holy Spirit controls the church meeting that will be what it is.

Now, of course, when we have someone stand up and violate the order, it's the responsibility of the elders to say something about it. And furthermore, it's the responsibility of every believer to listen to what he says and to make choice. Remember Paul says, “Prove all things. Hold fast that which is good.” That means that there were men who did stand up and perhaps out of immaturity said things that weren't so good. The elders shouldn't have to jump on their feet at every violation of some scriptural point, particularly the points that don't mean much and correct the person. The congregation should have some kind of maturity so that they can make choices. “Prove all things. Hold fast that which is good.”

Now, if it's a serious matter, then the elders should correct in order that some not be misled. The necessity for divine guidance we've talked about and ultimately, the divine authority of the Apostle Paul and the expression of these principles. The apostle, you know, when he gets to the end of 1 Corinthians 14 he says, “The test of a prophet and the test of spirituality,” is confession of the divine authority of Paul in the words that he speaks. In other words, he says, “You can tell the man who is a true prophet and you can tell the man who is truly spiritual by the way in which he responds to the things that I have given you in this chapter.” I think that's a good test for us. Edification is the control and subordination to the teaching of the word of God, the test of spirituality.

“The Local Church: Its Ministry and Meetings” by S. Lewis Johnson  
Copyright © 2008 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

Now, it would be great if all church meetings in the Christian church were like this. This is our ideal. May the Lord help us to accomplish it and measure up to it at least in a measure that will glorify him. Let's bow together in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these words from the Apostle Paul and from the rest of the New Testament, which so beautifully set forth for us the desire of our triune God in the assemblies of the saints. And help us, oh Lord, to realize the kinds of...

**[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]**